

## THE FERRY SYSTEM OF THE LOWER SACRAMENTO RIVER

JOHN THOMPSON

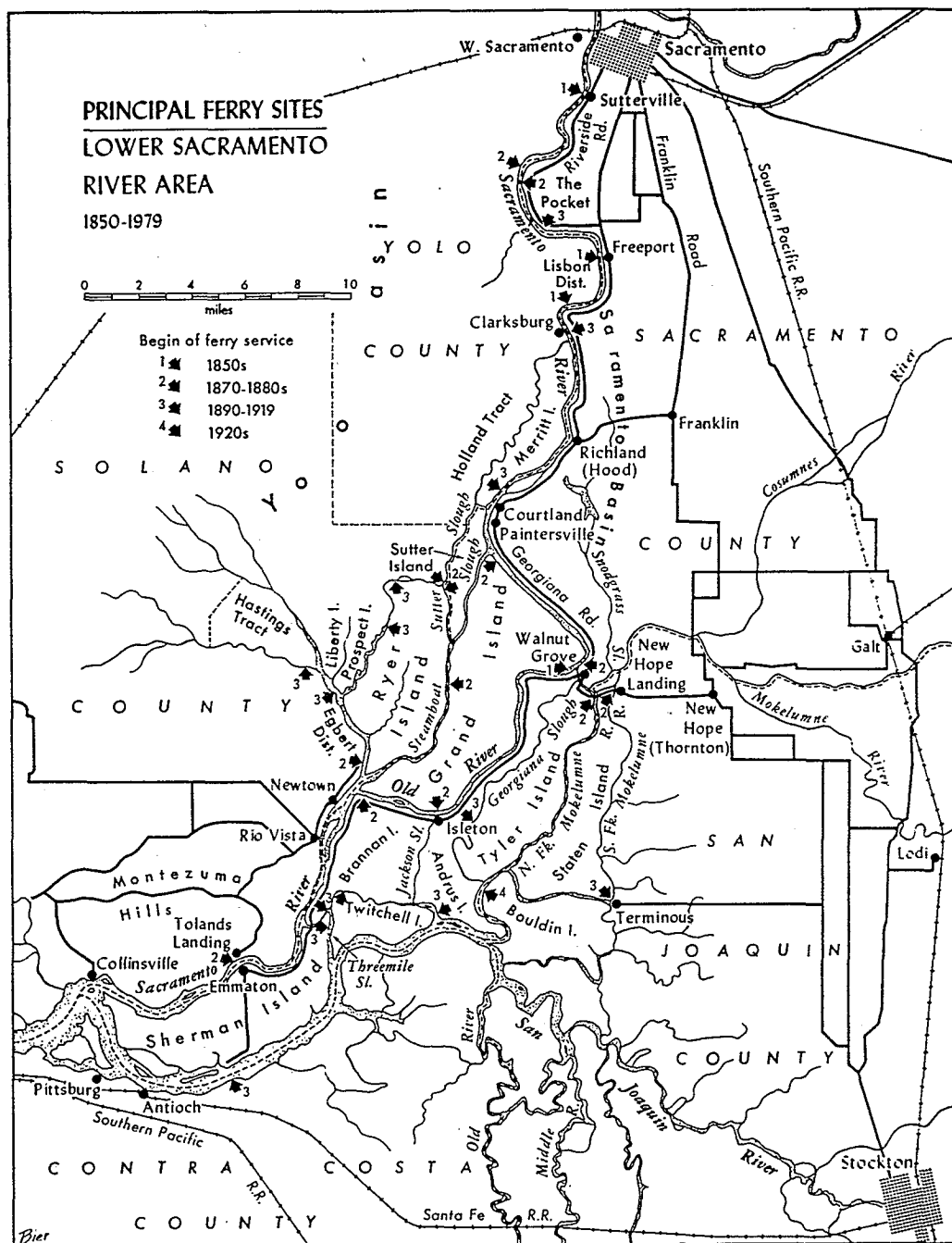
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Between the 1850's and 1920's, a system of ferries evolved on the lower Sacramento River and the channels which mingle its waters with the Mokelumne and San Joaquin rivers and the Yolo Basin. At the height of ferry and riverboat operations, the waterways below Sacramento together with their complementing roads afforded accessibility to delta lands that may well have been unsurpassed in California. Indeed, the concentration of ferries may well have been greater than anywhere in non-urban areas of North America. Ultimately, most ferries were supplanted with bridges. A few operate yet, representing a century and a quarter of continuity of service, an uncommonly long time in a field where obsolescence sweeps rapidly.

The drainage from more than one-third of California arises in the basins of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. The floodplains of these streams merge about fifty miles northeast of San Francisco as the rivers pass through a complex network of channels before discharging into the eastern end of the bays that lead to San Francisco. The segment of the Central Valley where the two rivers merge and enter Suisun Bay is known as the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Because over half of the 500,000 acres of peat and alluvial land located here lie below sea level, the area is preserved from returning to an estuarine swamp by about 1,100 miles of channel-front levee.

Before the Gold Rush, the delta was a tidal swamp frequented by Indians, a few trappers, and an occasional group of transient Anglo or Mexican Californians. While the gold fever yet continued strong, a few farmers settled on natural levees. These and later arrivals undertook the first of uncounted levee-building projects which ultimately transformed the delta from an imperfectly drained segment of floodplain to a productive farming region.

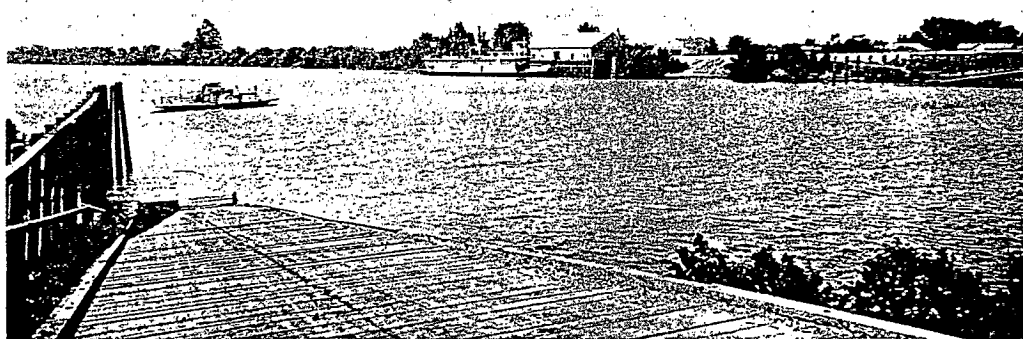
*John Thompson has held numerous professional teaching and administrative positions at locations throughout the world since receiving his Ph.D. from Stanford in 1958. Based first at Stanford (1959-1964), he is currently Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, where he has been since 1967. His various activities have taken him on assignment to Mexico, South America, and Pakistan. Dr. Thompson's interest in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is by no means transient. His Ph.D. dissertation concerned itself with the settlement geography of the area and an article on this subject was published in THE PACIFIC HISTORIAN in August, 1958.*



the river and the eastern side of the Sacramento Valley connected Richland (Hood) and Franklin. Like the New Hope Road, it was prone to seasonal flooding.

Local residents and land developers began the ferries in the lower Sacramento River area as commercial enterprises or private conveniences. Sooner or later, most commercial ferries operated under county franchises, and a number became toll-free public carriers. Non-commercial operations--mostly small, winch-operated craft--were ephemeral conveyances utilized to reach unpopulated or sparsely populated reclaimed tracts, so little documentation exists as to their size and useful life. On the other hand, twenty or more locations supported commercial ferries, and it is about these manned craft, mostly rope-guided scows, flatboats, or in later years pontooned cable ferries, that the remainder of this article focuses.

Most ferries operated at or immediately adjacent to the main road which followed the east bank of the Sacramento between Freeport and Walnut Grove. Others were



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*The paddlewheel ferry at Clarksburg leaving its slip on the east bank of the Sacramento River for the west side and Yolo County.*

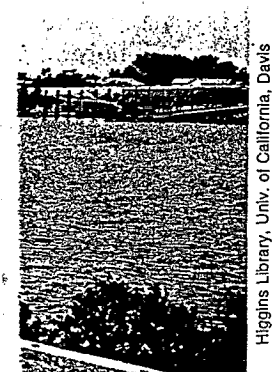
located off the Riverside Road, which followed the river from Sacramento to Sutterville, then verged inland through the Pocket to Freeport. Among early Sacramento River ferries, the most important strategically was the Old River or Newtown ferry, which operated between Brannan and Grand Islands and the west bank of the Sacramento above Newtown. Together with ferries between Walnut Grove and New Hope Landing, it made possible movement across the delta. Another important ferry entered service between the vicinity of Antioch and Sherman Island in 1919, by which time bridges had replaced most of the earlier ferries.<sup>3</sup>

The remaining ferries operated across lesser sloughs or channels to connect river villages with relatively remote newly reclaimed tracts to the south and southeast of Isleton and in the lower Yolo Basin. The major tracts in the latter area were within a six-mile radius of Rio Vista, Isleton, Walnut Grove, and Courtland.

From the 1850's into the 1920's, local individuals or partners operated most ferries. After the turn of the century, the toll ferries operating with franchises from Sacramento County were either replaced by free county ferries or supplanted by bridges. Those transferred to Sacramento County included the Sutter Island (by 1901), Glide's (1903), Walnut Grove (1916), and Clarksburg (1920) ferries. The

3. Rio Vista *River News*, July 5, 1919; April 28, 1923.

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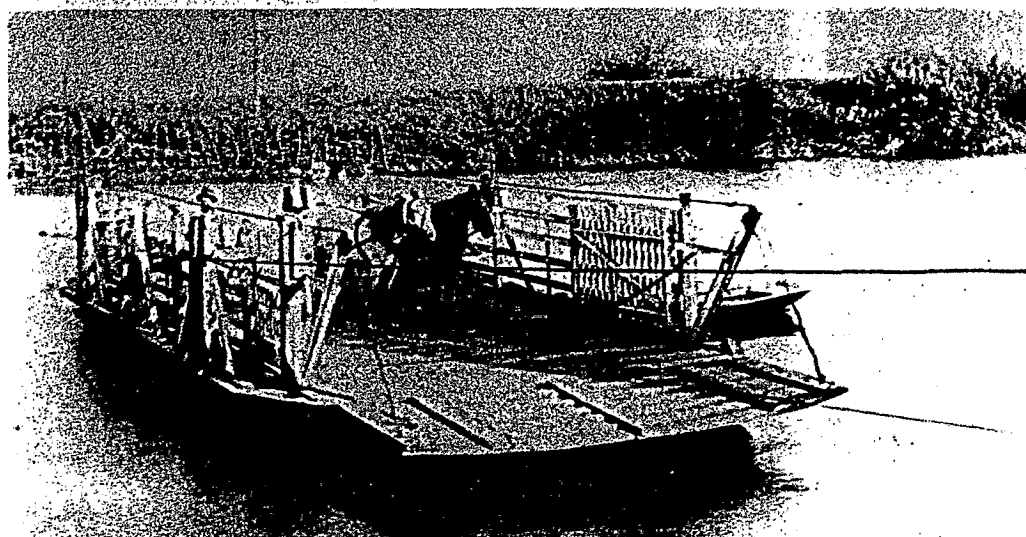
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Courtesy of David Phipps and the Sacramento River Delta Historical Society

*Miller's ferry operated on the North Fork of the Mokelumne River east of Walnut Grove between Staten and Tyler Island until 1872.*

State of California took over the Ryer Island ferry after 1932.<sup>4</sup> In addition, during this period the counties inaugurated ferry service at Threemile Sough, between Andrus and Bouldin Islands, and in the Yolo Basin. Meanwhile, delta interests prevailed upon the counties to replace the time-consuming shuttles with spans of timber and piling, iron and steel. Most bridges were built between 1900 and 1906 or 1915 and 1928. Of the six ferries which remained in 1950, three still operate in the vicinity of Ryer Island.<sup>5</sup>

The north-south route known initially as Georgiana Road followed the east bank of the Sacramento River between Freeport and Walnut Grove. Travel below Walnut Grove necessitated crossing Georgiana, Jackson, and Threemile sloughs. The head of Jackson Slough was sufficiently shallow and narrow that in 1871 it was dammed,<sup>6</sup> but Georgiana and Threemile sloughs had to be crossed by ferries. Although ferries are not known to have been established at the latter until 1904, L. W. Sharp's Walnut Grove ferry opened across Georgiana Slough about 1851.<sup>7</sup> It reached Grand Island as well as Andrus Island; perhaps in company with other craft, it was used to reach the heads of Tyler and Staten islands, less than half a mile from Walnut Grove.

By 1857, the Georgiana Road had become sufficiently popular to have been adopted as the county road between Freeport and Walnut Grove.<sup>8</sup> By then the commercial ferry which P. McGregor began in 1852 at Sutterville, a second nearby operated after

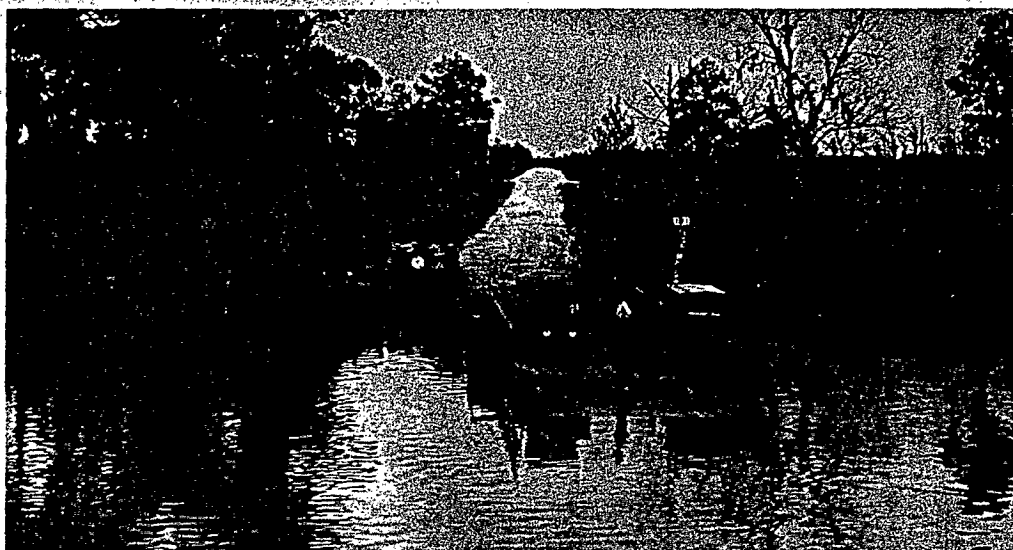
4. SCBS, T (November 4, 1901; May 4, 7, 1903), 131, 549, 554; Z (January 3, 1916), 388; SCBS, "Index to Minutes, 1919-1920," 33. *River News*, March 27, 1920. James R. Lauritzen to the author, March 27, 1978.

5. C.E. Erickson, *Sunset Sportsman's Atlas: San Francisco Bay and Delta Area* (Menlo Park, 1952), 29, 30. California State Automobile Association, "Bay and River Area" map (San Francisco, 1974.)

6. SCBS, Record, Swamplands, II (February 8, 1871), 5.

7. *History of Sacramento County, California* (Oakland, 1880), 221. *The Delta News* (Isleton), May 27, 1932.

8. SCBS, D (March 30, April 9, 25, 1857), 52, 61, 67.



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*Ferry conveyances were an integral aspect of the transportation system in areas of the Central Valley other than just the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Here two automobiles stand parked on a ferry just prior to transport across a river in San Joaquin County sometime in the 1920's.*

1856 by G. W. Ristine, and a third which G. C. Jackson started at Freeport in 1852 served a sizeable concentration of settlers.<sup>9</sup> During the 1860's and 1870's, they were used by farmers and drovers who supplied truck crops, dairy products, and beef cattle to Sacramento, in effect extending the capital's truck and dairy belt from the Pocket across the river into Yolo County.

Not until the 1870's were many new ferries established. Their owners appear to have anticipated increased movement between reclaimed land and such towns as Rio Vista, Isleton, and Walnut Grove. For example, in 1870 the well-publicized new farming tract on Sherman Island was linked to Toland's Landing by the R. E. and William Beasley (Twin House) ferry at Emmaton. The ferry's western landing lay four miles south of Rio Vista. In 1874 Andrew Ryan established a ferry closer to town at the strategic crossing between Newtown, the lower tip of Grand Island, and the north-western corner of Brannan Island.<sup>10</sup> Harry Lawson operated it after 1876. It became a general purpose ferry by 1892, presumably to improve transit across the delta between Rio Vista and New Hope and to extend Rio Vista's trading area.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, in 1866 Sperry Dye assumed the concession for Sharp's ferry between Walnut Grove and Andrus Island.<sup>12</sup> Alex Brown, the well-known banker, owned the service from

9. Tom Gregory and Others, *History of Yolo County, California* (Los Angeles, 1913), 89, 91; William O. Russell, ed., *History of Yolo County, California: Its Resources and People* (Woodland, 1940), 184, 211. Allen W. Welts to the author, March 30, 1978, citing SCBS meetings September 2, 1852, and March 5, 1856.

10. SCBS, I (July 13, 1870), 8; J (September 7, 1874; May 16, October 18, 1876), 6, 140, 214.

11. *Rio Vista Enterprise*, November 17, 1877; *River News*, October 3, 1890; January 22, 1892; December 1, 1893; February 8, 1895; January 25, 1901. SCBS, N (May 6, June 10, 1892), 580, 598.

12. Although Dye was the agent for the estate of J.W. Sharp, who died in 1880. J.S. "Dime Sharp" was operator for some years. Dye sold the Walnut Grove Ferry Company to Sacramento County in 1916. *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, August 30, 1880; *The Sacramento Union*, June 11, 1915; SCBS, L (February 3, 1886), 481; Z (January 3, 1916), 388.



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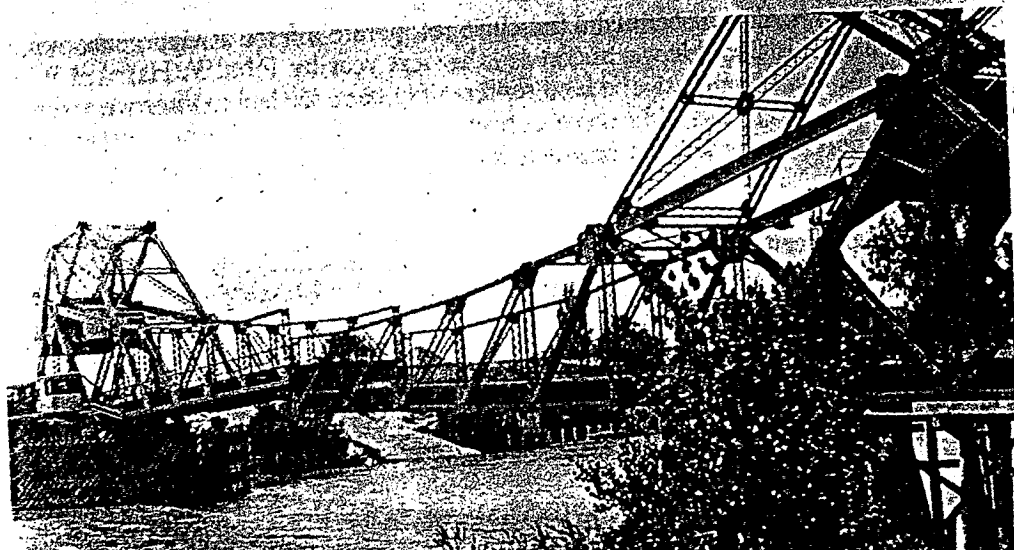
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Courtesy of Kathy Graham and the Sacramento River Delta Historical Society

*The bridging of the lower Sacramento River and its main distributaries was undertaken in two phases. The first consisted of responses to pressures for better linkages within the area's premier fruit growing district and to the outside. The original Walnut Grove bridge, pictured here, was completed during the second phase as part of a general plan for road improvement. The ferry slip which the bridge replaced appears to the side. This structure was supplanted by a more modern span in the 1950's.*

Walnut Grove to Grand Island between 1892 and 1894, when Clara B. Lord, N. C. McQueen, and W. G. Clark took it over.<sup>13</sup> After 1886, the big island was linked to the Georgiana road at Paintersville by the Grand Island Ferriage Co., which was organized by Mrs. Reuben Kercheval and Mary Runyon, at whose properties it landed.<sup>14</sup>

Ferries also played an important role in facilitating east-west travel. At least as early as 1878, a flatboat on lower Snodgrass Slough linked the Walnut Grove area to the vicinity of New Hope Landing. Miller's ferry operated between the heads of Tyler and Staten islands before January of 1872, when an earthen dam was erected across Tyler Slough near Walnut Grove.<sup>15</sup> Presumably a ferry also operated from New Hope Landing, because the building of the road to present Thornton (New Hope) was done to induce the landowners of Staten Island to favor the cession of the tract from Sacramento County to San Joaquin County.<sup>16</sup> From the juxtaposition of public roads at lower Staten Island and Terminous, it can be surmised that a ferry between the two also existed in 1895, even though no document confirms its presence until 1908.<sup>17</sup> The ferries at both ends of the island provided good access to the roads and rail lines serving Stockton, Lodi, and Sacramento.

13. SCBS, O (November 7, 1892; August 6, 11, 1894), 1-2, 26.

14. SCBS, L (March 2, 1886), 492.

15. *Stockton Daily Independent*, August 2, 1878; *Rio Vista Enterprise*, January 17, 1879; *The Daily Bee* (Sacramento), June 25, 1887; *River News*, April 4, 1890.

16. *Daily Evening Herald* (Stockton), April 8, 18, 20, 1878; *Sacramento Daily Record Union*, April 12, 1878.

17. H.T. Compton, "Map of the County of San Joaquin, 1895." U.S. Department of the Interior, Geological Survey (USGS). "Headreach Quadrangle," (Survey of 1908, ed. of 1910). *Stockton Daily Evening Record*, October 20, 1909.

In 1902 W. A. Curtis obtained a franchise to operate a ferry at Georgiana Slough just northeast of Isleton. He was succeeded the next year by John W. Harris.<sup>18</sup> While Isleton's business community and land renters may have wished to improve access to the island, they were probably more concerned with creating a shortcut to divert travelers who crossed the delta between Rio Vista, Walnut Grove, and New Hope Landing.

How much travel occurred across the delta is unknown. Until 1911 only the Old River ferry between Solano and Sacramento counties enabled travelers to cross the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta from west to east. The Old River ferry operated from 1874 to 1919, when the Rio Vista bridge opened. Between 1892 and 1909 the ferry was owned by Fred C. Lauritzen, whose successors were Julius Anderson and F. E. Benjamin.<sup>19</sup> After 1911 the Clayton ferry made possible travel from Byron in Contra Costa County to Stockton.<sup>20</sup>

Between 1890 and the 1920's reclamation in the lower Yolo Basin and the tracts south and east of Brannan and Andrus islands stimulated the establishment of new ferries. Most merely provided access to the newly reclaimed, sparsely populated tracts. However, the ferries across the San Joaquin River near Antioch and across the Mokelumne River southeast of Isleton in the 1920's were inspired by local aspirations to encourage highway travel between the San Francisco Bay area, Sacramento, and the vicinities of Lodi and Galt.

Reclamation efforts surged in the lower Yolo Basin north of Rio Vista in the late 1890's and early 1900's. After 1894, Ryer Island, the major tract, was linked toward

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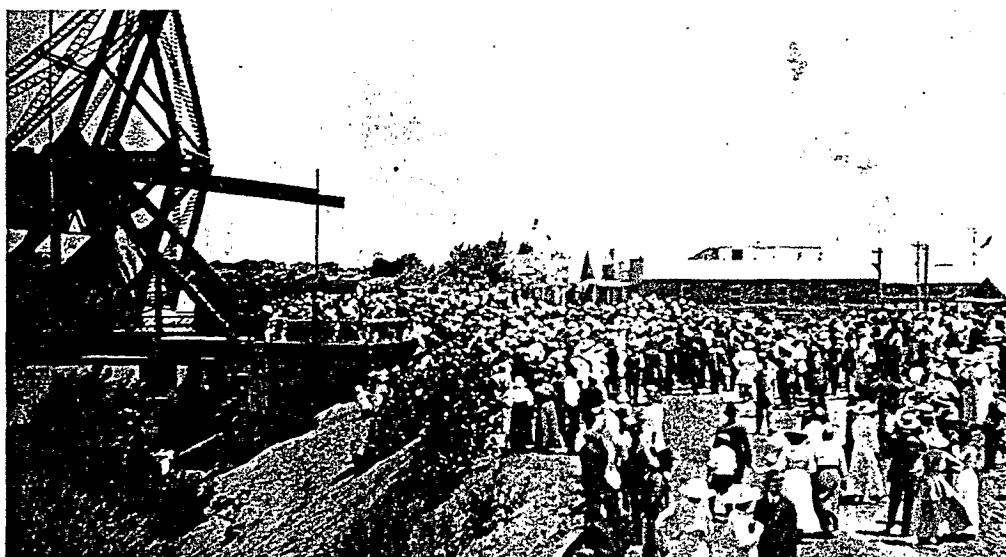
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18. J.C. Boyd, "Plat of Lands Owned by Estate of L. C. Rubble," (Survey of November 1902), State Lands Commission, Sacramento; SCBS, U (August 3, 6, November 5, 1903), 5, 11, 85.

19. *River News*, April 1, May 13, 1892; February 1, 1901; October 22, 1909; July 8, 1910; July 5, 1919. *Sacramento Union*, June 9, 1909; June 8, 1911; *Sacramento Bee*, April 9, December 6, 1909.

20. *Contra Costa Gazette*, July 29, 1911.



Courtesy of Kathy Graham and the Sacramento River Delta Historical Society

*The development of a modern road network linked by bridges at key points led to the demise of the ferry system. Here, residents gather to celebrate the opening of the Walnut Grove bridge in July 1916.*

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Courtesy of Kathy Graham and the Sacramento River Delta  
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the south by ferries operated by J. H. Thomas, his heirs, and a man named Ettinger. Ryer and Grand Islands were connected after 1897 by John Hollenbeck's ferry, which appears to have crossed Steamboat Slough at Howard's Landing before being shifted to Walker Landing prior to 1906. Other craft operated by about 1907 at the northeast corner of Ryer Island, on Miner and Sutter sloughs, and between Ryer and Prospect islands. The addition of ferries between Prospect Island, the Hastings Tract, and the Egbert District dates from about World War I.<sup>21</sup> Free county ferries ran between Ryer Island, the Holland Tract, and Liberty Island in the early 1920's.<sup>22</sup>

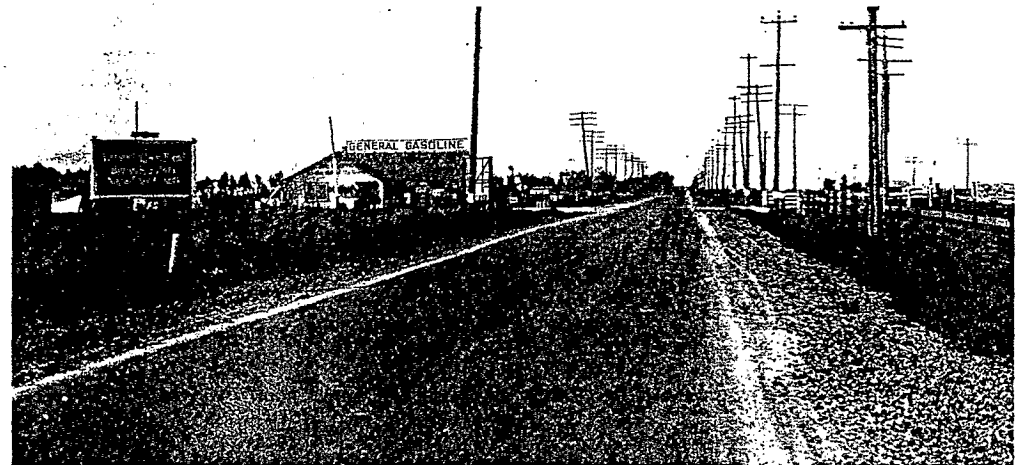
During the 1890's the efforts of several commercial ferrymen improved access to Sacramento for the truck and dairy farmers in the Lisbon District and above. The ferries appear to have reached the Pocket side of the river at successively more southern crossings. These ferries are identified with Dubois (1893), George Peters (1894), and Hadley (1897), whose successor, J. H. Glide, sold out in 1903 to Sacramento and Yolo counties. Further downstream, the Clarksburg ferry functioned between 1894 and 1913 and between 1919 and 1937. The Merritt Island ferry near Courtland may pre-date 1900, although evidence is elusive.<sup>23</sup> It is also difficult to verify the existence of commercial ferries between Merritt, Sutter, and Grand Islands.

Twitchell and Sherman islands seem to have been added to areas of Sacramento County accessible by commercial or free ferries and roads between 1900 and 1920. In 1904 the F. C. Lauritzen ferry at Threemile Slough linked newly-reclaimed Twitchell

21. *River News*, December 1, 1893, June 8, 1894. SCBS, Q (May 3, 1897), 346-48. USGS, "Isleton Quadrangle," (Surveys of 1906 and 1908, ed. of 1916); "Cache Slough Quadrangle," (Survey of 1906, ed. of 1916), and "Vorden Quadrangle," (Survey of 1906, ed. of 1916); *Sacramento Union*, June 13, 1911. Lauritzen letter.

22. *River News*, March 31, 1923. Lauritzen letter.

23. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (by L.C. Easton), "Map of the Lower Sacramento River from Sacramento to Ryde, Calif.," (1894), sheets 3 and 6. SCBS, T (November 4, 1901; May 4, 7, 1903), 131, 549, 554. *River News*, May 15, 1903; April 23, 1915. USGS "Vorden Quadrangle," C.L. Green, Draftsman, "Official Map of the County of Sacramento," (Rev. ed., October 1913); Rosemary Woodrow, Yolo County Library, to the author, February 24, 1978.



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Delta residents hoped the transcontinental "Victory Highway," running through the towns of the lower Sacramento River on its way to San Francisco, would offer improved accessibility to the area as well as spur on local economic development. Such enthusiasms were cooled, however, by the opening of alternative routes to the Bay Area.



Island with Brannan and Sherman Islands.<sup>24</sup> A second ferry operated in 1908 between eastern Twitchell Island and Andrus Island. Owner Charles Studerus failed to obtain a franchise in 1915, perhaps because the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors contemplated installing free ferries between Twitchell and both Brannan and Sherman islands.<sup>25</sup> The latter crossing was abandoned in 1919 in favor of a ferry between Brannan and Sherman islands. Meanwhile, F. C. Lauritzen received a franchise to operate between Sherman Island and Toland's Landing.<sup>26</sup> His ferry probably functioned little after 1913 because of the widening and deepening of the Sacramento River below Rio Vista. A county ferry began operation at Threemile Slough soon after.

A notable addition to the ferry fleet came in 1919 when the sidewheeler automobile ferry *Sherman* built by Chris Lauritzen inaugurated service across the San Joaquin River between Sherman Island and Antioch. The ferry's attraction of automobile traffic strengthened the case for constructing the Antioch bridge, which opened January 1, 1926. Conceivably some of the same local interests that invested in the toll bridge had encouraged Lauritzen to build the *Sherman*. There was a good deal of enthusiasm in the lower Sacramento River and Antioch areas for parlaying the bridge, the new River Road opened along the lower Sacramento in 1922, and the Terminous to Isleton road finished in 1926 into an interregional network uniting northern California.<sup>27</sup> The effort culminated in the designation of the Sacramento River Road and the Antioch bridge as segments in the nationwide "Victory Highway."<sup>28</sup> The opening of the Carquinez Strait bridge in 1927, however, ended the dream of primacy for the Sacramento route.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the River Road and crossroads passing through either New Hope Landing-Walnut Grove or Terminous-Isleton, and Rio Vista carried enough freight and passengers in motor vehicles that the traditional function of the road and ferry networks as feeder for river carriers dwindled.

In conclusion, the ferries on the lower Sacramento River evolved as segments of an inter-dependent system of roads and waterways. Their function was to facilitate relatively long-distance, through traffic as well. However, the travel and freighting activity oriented for so long to water carriers diminished as motor vehicles came into vogue; their acceptance also accelerated the process of replacing ferries with bridges. By 1926 bridges had largely supplanted ferries along the principal roads, and inland water carriers were in decline. Since then bridges have all but replaced ferries elsewhere along the lower Sacramento River. One trusts that the remaining tethered craft at Ryer Island continue to be viable alternatives to bridges, for the ferries represent an institutional heritage and mode of life worthy of recall to the increasingly numerous users who know the lower river primarily as a recreation area, not as the densely peopled corridor of intensively farmed land and heavily traveled waterway that it was in the era before the automobile.

24. *Sacramento Union*, April 8, 1904.

25. USGS, "Bouldin Quadrangle," (Survey of 1908, ed. of 1910); SCBS, W (May 11, 1908), 292; Y (March 3, 20, 1913) 503, 512; Z (May 4, August 31, 1915), 290, 331. Minutes, Twitchell Island Reclamation District, Board of Trustees, November 15, 1910, 8 (courtesy of J.R. Lauritzen). Sacramento County Recorder, "Road Deeds, 109, 441-443. *River News*, October 11, 1919; March 19, 1921. *The Byron Times*, October 17, 1919.

26. SCBS, V (May 9, 1907) 567-9.

27. *River News*, July 5, October 11, 1919; June 17, 1922; April 28, 1923; September 3, 1925; January 7, 1926; August 11, 1927.

28. *Ninth Development Edition of the Byron Times* (Byron, 1924-25), 64. *Antioch Centennial Almanac* (Antioch, n.d.) 39-41.

29. "Carquinez Straits Bridged," *Motorland*, Vol. 20, No. 6 (June 1927), 33.

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